

What Moves America? Some Transportation Trends in the US



AP
Streetcars along Canal Street in New Orleans, Louisiana

FAITH LAPIDUS: Welcome to THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English. I'm Faith Lapidus.

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: And I'm Christopher Cruise. This week on our program, we look at transportation in the United States.

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FAITH LAPIDUS: A federal safety agency wants to send a message to all drivers in the United States: keep your attention on the road. The National Transportation Safety Board has called for a nationwide ban on the use of portable electronic devices while driving. The proposal by the NTSB would not ban emergency uses or the use of what it calls "devices designed to support the driving task."

Across the country, different states have different levels of restrictions on texting or talking on the phone while driving.

The safety board called for the nationwide ban last month after meeting to discuss a deadly accident. It happened in two thousand ten in Missouri. A pickup

truck drove into the back of a bigger truck that had slowed for road work. A school bus then struck the pickup truck, and a second school bus crashed into the first one.

Thirty-eight people were injured, but a fifteen-year-old student was killed. So was the nineteen-year-old driver of the pickup truck. NTSB investigators found that he had sent and received eleven text messages in the eleven minutes before the accident. He had received the last text right before the crash.

The government linked driver distraction to more than three thousand deaths in twenty-ten. Those represented about nine percent of all road deaths that year.

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: The experts at the National Transportation Safety Board can make any recommendations they wish. But the Department of Transportation does not have to follow them. Aaron Bragman is an automotive analyst in Detroit, Michigan. He notes that the department has decided for now to further study the issue of distracted driving.

AARON BRAGMAN: "The NTSB's declaration is just basically a recommendation. It really doesn't have any kind of binding legal status it and really doesn't force anybody to do anything. The statement specifically from the NTSB has basically been almost universally rejected as simply illogical and impossible and something that really couldn't even be enforced."

Mr. Bragman points out that automakers keep making it easier for drivers to do other things while they drive.

AARON BRAGMAN: "Increasingly we're seeing a lot of these new cars are already coming with hands-free devices. It's an increasing trend that we're seeing across the industry and it's not happening in just expensive cars. It's actually helping to improve sales."

FAITH LAPIDUS: Cars and trucks are not the only vehicles where phones and other devices can cause distractions. The NTSB points to accidents like a train crash in California in two thousand eight. One of the engineers was texting and ran through a red signal and into another train. That crash killed twenty-five people.

In two thousand nine, two airline pilots became distracted by their personal laptops during a flight. They flew one hundred sixty kilometers past the city where they were supposed to land.

In two thousand ten, two Hungarian tourists died in a boat crash on the Delaware River in Philadelphia. Investigators said a crew member on a tugboat had repeatedly been paying attention to a cell phone and laptop computer.

Twenty-two marks ten years since the NTSB handled its first investigation involving distraction from a wireless device. In two thousand two a new driver talking on the phone crossed into opposing traffic on a road in Maryland. The car turned over. Five people were killed.

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Almost everyone knows about the risks of distracted driving. But what about distracted walking -- people who get struck by cars or trains while wearing headphones? A new report says the United States had one hundred sixteen headphone-related pedestrian crashes from two thousand four to two thousand eleven.

Three times as many of these happened in the last two years as in the first two years. The researchers say the increase over time closely follows the rise in popularity of MP3 music players and other devices that use headphones.

Seventy percent of the crashes killed the pedestrian. More than two-thirds of them were male and under the age of thirty. The largest number were age fifteen to twenty-four.

The operators of almost a third of the vehicles reported having sounded their horn to warn the pedestrian. More than half of the accidents involved trains.

Dr. Richard Lichenstein led the study by medical researchers at the University of Maryland. The findings appear in the journal Injury Prevention.

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FAITH LAPIDUS: Demand for smaller cars continues to redefine the auto industry in the United States. That demand is bringing jobs back to an industry that lost tens of thousands of workers in the last ten years.

But it does not help some existing workers, like Nicole Current.

NICOLE CURRENT: "I make truck axles, so as the auto industry tries to get away from the larger size vehicles, and tries to get to more fuel efficient, more economical vehicles, and gas prices being where they are with what product we make, it makes it extremely difficult when in the actual economy, people aren't buying trucks."

The changes in what people are buying is creating jobs in the so-called green car industry and eliminating others, like Ms. Current's job. She has worked on an assembly line in Detroit, Michigan, for fifteen years. She hopes to find one of those new jobs.

Auto analyst Aaron Bragman says car sales have slowly been increasing over the last few months in the United States. This, he says, is mainly because old cars need to be replaced.

AARON BRAGMAN: "The American vehicle fleet, which is the total sum of all the vehicles on the road, is actually the oldest it's ever been. It's over ten years old right now. People simply have to get a new one because the old ones are starting to wear out."

But to save money, he says, most people replace their old car with a used car instead of a truly new one.

Mr. Bragman says when Americans shop for a car, they are most concerned about fuel economy. But that does not necessarily mean they are looking for hybrids, which use gasoline and electric power, like the Toyota Prius.

AARON BRAGMAN: "Really what we're seeing is not so much people specifically looking for hybrid cars. Although fuel economy does remain very important to new buyers, they're realizing that some of the new gasoline cars [are] almost approaching hybrid levels of fuel economy. So you don't even necessarily need to spend the extra money for a hybrid vehicle in order to get really, really decent fuel economy."

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Still, Greg Thome at Toyota says the Prius remains one of his company's most popular models.

GREG THOME: "The Prius has done really well. We expect our sales this year to grow incrementally as far as Prius is concerned, because we are growing from one Prius model to a family of four vehicles."

Toyota launched the smaller Prius C this month at the two thousand twelve North American International Auto Show in Detroit. Mr. Thome says the smaller model is an answer to changes in demand after the Great Recession.

GREG THOME: "The recession certainly hit all models. Now we're starting to see a lot of people come back to the market, including for new technology like hybrids and so forth."

Almost every manufacturer at this year's Detroit Auto Show is now marketing more fuel-efficient models.

You can watch a video about some of the new "green" cars at voaspecialenglish.com.

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FAITH LAPIDUS: Streetcars have been carrying people through New Orleans for more than one hundred fifty years. Anthony Falls has been driving streetcars for ten of those years and still enjoys the job.

ANTHONY FALLS: "First of all, this is one of the oldest rail lines in the world. And second of all, it's about being part of history. Because at one time, they didn't have people of color driving street cars, so I think of that as a big part of my job."

Streetcars carry passengers along New Orleans' famous St. Charles Avenue and other streets. People ride cars built in the nineteen twenties.

FEMALE PASSENGER: "I've been riding streetcars ever since I started high school. Sometimes we would go out to lunch, jump on a streetcar. It's convenient and it's cheap."

MALE PASSENGER: "The reason why I like it? I don't know, it's a piece of history. They have these old cars, and they respect them, and they keep them running. You can ride down here and be part of the living history of New Orleans."

The city in Louisiana is one of about twenty American cities that are expanding or developing streetcar systems. Streetcars are usually powered by overhead lines that carry electricity. Dominic Moncada from the Regional Transit Authority in New Orleans explains why more cities are turning to streetcars.

DOMINIC MONCADA: "With gas prices constantly increasing, a lot of public transit agencies are trying to find ways to modernize their system -- anything that has a better cost benefit for an agency."

New Orleans is laying down new tracks to expand its system. Other cities including San Francisco, California and Portland, Oregon, are also expanding their systems. In Portland, a streetcar line opened in two thousand one. It covers six-and-a-half kilometers and has about twelve thousand daily riders. A second line is set to open this year.

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CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Do you ride a bike to work or to get around town? Local officials in Washington, DC, wish more people would. The city government in the District of Columbia started the Bikeshare program in September of two thousand ten. Today, there are more than one hundred thirty stations around the city where members can get or return a bike. In all, the nation's capital and neighboring Arlington, Virginia, have more than one thousand Bikeshare bicycles.

FEMALE RIDER: "I love it. I use it every single day to get to school."

People can buy memberships for a single day, three days, one month or a full year. Chris Holben is the project director of Washington's Capital Bikeshare program.

CHRIS HOLBEN: "We have about twenty thousand annual members who can walk up take a bike out. We also had about ninety thousand visitors use our bikes. Those were tourists or people here for the day".

People used the bikes for one million rides during the last year. Mr. Holben says this works out to fifty thousand fewer automobile trips. A survey showed that five percent of members would have used cars had bikes not been available.

In addition to Arlington, two other Washington suburbs have agreed to join the network: Montgomery County, Maryland, and Alexandria, Virginia. The program is expected to grow to almost three hundred stations and almost three thousand bikes by the end of this year.

You can watch a video about Capital Bikeshare at voaspecialenglish.com.

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FAITH LAPIDUS: Our program was written and produced by Brianna Blake, with reporting by Kane Farabaugh, Selah Hennessy and Muhammad Atif. I'm Faith Lapidus.

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: And I'm Christopher Cruise. You can find texts and MP3s of our programs, along with English teaching activities, at voaspecialenglish.com. Join us again next week for THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English.